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DE RUEHVL #0318/01 1260440
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 050440Z MAY 08
FM AMEMBASSY VILNIUS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 2248
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 0221
RHMFISS/HQ USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE
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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 VILNIUS 000318

AMEMBASSY MINSK SENDS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [ECON](#) [ENRG](#) [BO](#)

SUBJECT: EMBASSY MINSK WEEKLY POL/ECON REPORT - May 02, 2008

11. The following are brief items of interest compiled by Embassy Minsk.

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Civil Society

12. Prominent Protestant Pastor Fined

A Minsk district court fined prominent Protestant Leader and New Life Church (NLC) pastor Vyacheslav Goncharenko BYR 1,400,000 (USD 650) April 25 for organizing a signature campaign to petition amendments to the 2002 religion law. The judge ruled that campaign organizers failed to seek approval of draft amendments from the Justice Ministry and to register the group collecting signatures. Goncharenko denounced the fine as unjust and maintained that no legitimate legal tools exist in Belarus to push for change of the religion laws. NLC lawyer Sergey Lukanin is set to stand trial for the same offense.

13. Police Confiscate Independent Newspaper Print Run

Police officers confiscated hundreds of copies of independent newspaper "Vitebskiy Kuryer M" April 25 from opposition activist and distributor Valery Shchukin in Vitebsk. The officers violently apprehended Shchukin at a bus stop upon his arrival from Smolensk, Russia, where the newspaper is printed. He was discharged the next day and is now facing administrative charges on violating newspaper distribution procedures.

14. BKGB Drops Case against Opposition Youth

The Gomel BKGB office closed a criminal case against local Malady Front activist Andrey Tenyuta April 25. Senior investigator Dmitriy Sedlerov informed Tenyuta in an official letter that the charges of participating in an unregistered organization were dropped, and that the BKGB would return a computer and other personal belongings seized from him in October 2007.

15. Opposition Leader Briefly Detained

The police detained United Civic Party (UCP) leader Anatoliy Lebedko, three UCP youth activists, and an independent journalist in downtown Minsk April 29 for passing out copies of the bi-weekly "Narodnaya Volya." They also prevented Lebedko from delivering the UCP-prepared "Alternate State of the Nation" Address to Parliament. The five were transported to a precinct office and released three hours later without charge.

16. Gomel Opposition Continues To Face Harassment

A Gomel district court sentenced local Belarusian Christian Democracy activist Sergey Trifonov to 10 days in jail April 28 and opposition youth Mariya Tulzhenkova to 7 days in jail April 25. The two were found guilty of participating in an unauthorized March 23 demonstration celebrating the 90th anniversary of the Belarusian National Republic. The police arrested Trifonov April 25 after he did not attend an April 23 court hearing.

Domestic Economy

17. Nuke Opponents Labeled "Enemies of the People"

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While visiting the Gomel region April 26 to pay tribute to the victims of the Chernobyl disaster, Lukashenko called opponents of plans to build a nuclear power plant "enemies of people." He asserted that opponents protest simply to gain political recognition and are not genuinely concerned about safety. Since neighboring countries already have nuclear plants, Lukashenko stated such opposition "makes no sense."

International Trade

18. Lukashenko: Investment Climate to be in Top 30

Speaking to Parliament on April 29, Aleksandr Lukashenko announced his goal to make country's investment climate rank among the world's top 30. He did not elaborate on timing, but instructed the government to develop appropriate support mechanisms and reduce red tape. Lukashenko said he believes Belarus was wise to be cautious about foreign investment and pointed out that large multinationals such as Commerzbank and Heineken "line up to" secure his clearance on investing in Belarus. During a trip to Gomel on April 26, Lukashenko opined that foreign investors would enter Belarus "no matter what leadership we have here, because we are in the center of Europe."

19. Quote of the Week

Aleksandr Lukashenko, touching upon succession plans while commenting on pro-government NGO Belaya Rus:

"They say that this organization was developed for the benefit of the future president, and that the next president will be my older son. But I have already said that it's my younger son who will be president of Belarus."

Moore
Cloud